

“First I Must Tell about Seeing”

(De)monstrations of Visuality and
the Dynamics of Metaphor in Anne
Carson’s *Autobiography of Red*

It is in fact upon the world of things needing to be uncovered that
the world of merely visible things keeps exerting its pressure.
(Simonides fr. 598, trans. Carson, *Economy* 60)

1. A Metaphor of Metaphor

Anne Carson excavates and resurrects Geryon, the red monster with wings, in her “novel in verse,” *Autobiography of Red*. Her portrait of a monster who makes photographic portraits offers a dense meditation on two related terms—vision and revision—that are key to Carson’s implicit, yet consistent theorization of the relationships between language and images.

Carson claims she was a painter before she was a creative writer. Recalling the “rhapsodic” moment in an art class that she took as a child in which she was allowed to write a “kind of legend” on one of her images, she has explained that her first book of poetry, *Short Talks*, was originally intended to be a set of drawings with lengthy titles: “Nobody liked the drawings so I expanded the titles into the talks” (Interview). Despite the fact that her movement into poetry appears to have been initiated by the erasure of her work as a visual artist, traces of her interest in art appear throughout her writings. To read the body of her work is to be immersed in an exquisite frenzy of the visible in which inscription, painting, photography, film, and television collide in one textual space. Yet it would be a mistake to think that Carson’s engagement with the visual reflects her simple assent to a notion with some currency in contemporary cultural studies, namely that cultural history has led to a dominance of visual media over verbal activities of speech, writing, textuality, and reading, and that this dominance comes at

the expense of other sensory modalities (Mitchell, *Picture* 16). Reviving such “tactics of imagination” (*Eros* 69) as monstrous structures and language while she bounces between antiquity and the contemporary moment, in *Autobiography* Carson pictures a monster’s pictures in order to lead us away from the world of merely visible things and into “the counterworld behind the facts and inside perceived appearances” (*Economy* 60). It would also be a mistake to confuse Carson’s interest in the visual with the disengaged, disembodied vision Norman Bryson associates with the aoristic mode that has dominated Western painting and philosophy. Carson’s archaeological excavation and resurrection of the monster Geryon recovers a subordinate history of deictic practices within philosophy and art from antiquity to the present day, which “create and refer to their own perspective” (Bryson 88). In this revisionary “counterworld,” signification is playfully carnal. Fascinated with their own genesis and development, the alternative forms of cultural practice Carson uncovers inscribe the spatiality and the temporality of both the producer and the receiver. So, although it might look like Carson sets her sights on the graphic, especially the photographic and cinematographic, her focus is wider, on “the act that Simonides calls *λόγος* [*logos*] and defines as ‘a picture of things’ for it contains visibles and invisibles side by side, strangeness by strangeness” (Carson, *Economy* 68).

At the heart of Carson’s investigation into *logos* lies metaphor, one of the chief “subterfuges” by which the visual domain may be introduced into the verbal arts (Bal 3). As Umberto Eco puts it, metaphor conflates two images: two things become different from themselves and yet remain recognizable (96). Metaphor is not merely ornamental. It is also a cognitive instrument:

And thus the metaphor posits (‘posits’ in a philosophical sense, but also in a physical sense, as ‘in *putting before the eyes*,’ το πρὸ ὀμμάτων ποιεῖν a proportion that, wherever it may have been deposited, was not before the eyes; or it was before the eyes and the eyes did not see it, as with Poe’s purloined letter. To point out, or teach how to see, then. (102)

What does metaphor point out or teach us how to see? asks Eco. Not the real itself, but rather a knowledge of the “dynamics of the real” (102). The best metaphors, he suggests, are those that point out the cultural process of semiosis (102).

Carson’s red-winged photographer is one of these best metaphors. As a figure uniting strangeness with strangeness, her monster is an icon of the things that lie just beyond our physical vision (past the edge of our maps, on the other side of our waking state). Her monster is also a symbolic tool

, which she probes the secrets of perception, temporality, and language. Because Carson's monster refers to nothing phenomenally real, because he is a purely figurative sign, he can be understood as a metaphor of metaphor itself (Williams 12). That Carson develops the metaphor of the monster as a metaphor of metaphor in order to demonstrate language's power of "making and begetting" is no small thing, since, as the philosophers have long insisted, "metaphor seems to involve the usage of philosophical language in its entirety" (Derrida, "White" 209).

Carson has written extensively about the workings of metaphor. Before focusing on the way her metaphor of monstrosity is both visionary and revisionary, it is useful to turn to one of her poems, "Essay on What I Think About Most," where she claims that "From the true mistakes of metaphor a lesson can be learned. // Not only that things are other than they seem, / and so we mistake them, / but that such mistakenness is valuable. / Hold onto it, Aristotle says, / there is much to be seen and felt here" (*Men* 31). Referring to Aristotle's discussion of metaphor in the *Rhetoric*, Carson argues that the trope demonstrates novel and valuable ways of feeling as well as of seeing. Her injunction via Aristotle to "hold" onto mistakenness and "feel" it is made possible because of the operations of metaphor, of course, but what is important about this particular metaphor is its emphasis on the sensory. As she sheds light on both the participatory and embodied dimensions of our thinking made possible by metaphor, Carson issues a challenge to the difficult legacy of Cartesian dualism.

2. Monstrous Genres

Technically, *Autobiography of Red* is not an autobiography, nor really, as the subtitle suggests, is it "A Novel in Verse." Working with the fragments of a lyric poem about the monster Geryon from the sixth century B.C.E. poet Stesichoros of Himnara called the *Geryoneis*, Carson locates the work in a larger literary history and explicates its importance, translates it into English, and finally adapts its core elements to create an extended novelistic narrative. The central portions of the *Autobiography*, then, take the form of a *Künstlerroman*, but one that doubles an earlier telling of the same "cross section of scenes, both proud and pitiful" (6) of a monster struggling with human things like family and fate. To this mirrored image of mythic narrative materials, Carson adds a framing apparatus of prefaces and appendices that, through citation, also repeat earlier commentary on the Geryon matter (6). Generically, the text refuses to blend its constituent parts. Juxtaposing

the scholarly and the lyrical, the narrative and the journalistic, this is a hybrid text, what Judith Halberstam describes as a “stitched body of distorted textuality” (33).

That Carson refuses to blend the different genres into a more coherent structure recalls a debate in classical aesthetics in which the ideal text was figured through a visual metaphor as a healthy, intact, symmetrical, beautiful, static body, while writing that failed to live up to the ideal was figured as a monstrous body. Writers like Longinus and Horace imply that there is something devastatingly counterproductive, even self-annihilating, about a text that, “like a sick man’s dreams,” risks monstrous combinations (Horace 128). When contemporary reviewers have on occasion complained that Carson’s combinations of the poetic with the scholarly are “unproductive” and give it a “stale air of pedantry and puzzle” (Kirsch), they seem to be blind to the fact that Carson’s mission in this text—to resurrect *a monster* and demonstrate the powers of revision—hinges on her deliberate mating of disparate things. Form, content, and purpose could not be less at odds than they are here.

3. Revisioning Geryon

Just as *Autobiography of Red* is an assemblage of disparate genres, Carson’s monster Geryon is a composite pieced together from fragments which originate elsewhere. To understand what Geryon demonstrates in Carson’s work, it is important to trace the origins and history of the various elements which combine to form him.

Though Carson never mentions this incarnation of Geryon explicitly, it is not difficult to uncover the fact that Geryon was a significant, though marginal, figure in Canto XVII (the half-way point) of Dante’s *Inferno*. Many of Carson’s interests in the relationship between vision and visibility and poetic language reflect and refract Dante’s. Described as a vile monster whose stench fills the world, Dante’s Geryon carries Virgil and Dante on his back down to Malebolge, the eighth level of hell where the sin of Fraud is punished. Dante’s Geryon is depicted as a figure of duplicity, “fraud’s foul emblem” (“*imagine di froda*”) (XVII 6). His sight fills the poet with terror but also with a sense of liberation, because, as the vehicle permitting the continuation of the poet’s journey, the monster represents the very instruments of deceitfulness and lying that the poet must use. When Dante recounts that Geryon’s back and breasts and both sides are “painted with designs of knots and circlets” more coloured in field and figure than any

cloth ever woven by a Tartar or Turk or the nets loomed by Arachne (XVII 13–15), it is clear that the monster is to be perceived as an emblem of an aesthetic fraud, an “image” (*imagine*) of the kind of lying performed by the pictorial art of poetry (XVII 6). Compared to a boat, a beaver, an eel, a falcon, and an arrow, Dante’s Geryon is connected with motion, and this too allies him with the poet’s tools. Du Marsais’s definition of metaphor (which is indebted to Aristotle’s definition) as “a figure by means of which the proper, literal meaning of a word is transported” facilitates an understanding of the analogy between monster and metaphor conveyed with Geryon’s flight (Derrida, “White” 234). A consideration of Geryon’s mobility—his ability to “transport,” both literally and figuratively—leads to a consideration of another kind of mobility in Dante’s text that is important to Carson: the mobility of the gaze of the viewer. In his depiction of Geryon, Dante makes a distinction between appearances and essences, between parts and wholes. His Geryon is an “image” of fraud, but in this image, appended to the trunk of a serpent and the paws of an animal, is the face of a just man, outwardly kind (“*La faccia sua era faccia d’uom giusto, / tanto benigna avea di fuor la pelle*”) (XVII 10–11). In order not to be deceived by the contradictory parts of the image, the beholder (the poet and also the reader) of such a hybrid composite must learn a way of seeing that is mobile enough to apprehend the whole, and powerful enough to penetrate the surface. Like Dante, Carson is interested in the ethics and aesthetics of fraud, and so when she transports Dante’s Geryon into contemporary narrative, the monster also brings with him Dante’s concerns about the poetic lie that can transport us, and about ways of seeing that can carry us past the surface of appearances.

Carson’s Geryon initially knows nothing about lies, but notices quickly that words dissemble and dis-assemble: divorced from their literal meanings, words keep coming apart or cracking in half (26, 62). Herakles’ rhetoric is particularly treacherous for Geryon. His promises are slippery, moving for instance from statements about intimacy—“we’ll always be friends” (62)—to distancing—“we’re true friends you know that’s why I want you to be free” (74). Geryon begins his autobiography trying to put together the pieces of this fractured world of language, first with glue (34), then by adding a corrective in the form of a happier ending to a story he has written (38), but he soon abandons these palliative measures and makes the very paradox of the power and fragility of language the subject of his photographs.

If Geryon’s connection to Dante’s monster foregrounds a theory of poetic lying, Carson further develops this theory in the highly convoluted syllogistic

exercise she offers as “Appendix C” to the main body of the narrative of *Autobiography*. Here she suggests that as an integral part of stories, lies set things into motion. (Elsewhere, Carson suggests that lies make possible the continuation of story: “everytime you see I would have to tell the whole story all over again or else lie so I lie I just lie who are they who are the storytellers who can put an end to stories” [*Plainwater* 25–26].) Trespassing the boundaries between reality and the imagination (something monsters in stories also do), lies operate logical reversals, and in each reversal is the possibility of a return. The imagery Carson develops around her discourse on lies is dynamic: we are “in reverse”; we will “go along without incident”; we will “meet Stesichoros on our way back”; we will “be taken downtown by the police for questioning” (*Autobiography* 19–20). Her argument, if one can be stitched together, is that while we are thus transported by the lie (or by its kin, metaphor), we can either be eyewitnesses to a landscape that, because of the lie, looks inside out, or we can be blinded. In effect, both of these propositions mean the same thing: we learn to see in ways that exceed the merely visible world (19–20). The monster Geryon thus offers Carson a point of entry into an argument about the ethical, cognitive, and perceptual possibilities unleashed by language.

The scene in Dante’s *Inferno* in which the monster Geryon appears is one of the text’s most dramatic because of the sense of narrative visualization enabled by Geryon’s flight. Robert Hollander remarks on the cinematic quality of Dante’s prose in Canto XVII, all the more notable since it would be several centuries before the technologies of the cinema would be invented:

In his innovative description of flight, Dante offers a cinematic succession of images designed to establish a “perspective vision” for the architectural complex of the eighth circle where, as we shall see, the variation in Dante’s original topography with its “pouches,” “ridges” and “bridges” requires—in modern terms—a clarity and precision of camera angles, depth of field, lighting and dimension. From Dante’s timid aerial look down from Geryon’s back into the pit below to numerous and even risky positionings on the little bridges to catch sight of a particular sinner, the narrator becomes even more insistent in his techniques of the “zoom to close-up,” . . . the “wide pan” . . . and the “aerial shot” . . . making the reader at times even conscious of the “stage directions” of this visualization.

In Carson’s hands, this proto-cinematic inheritance of “perspective vision” makes its appearance in her translation of Stesichoros’s fragments which offers, as she puts it,

a tantalizing cross section of scenes, both proud and pitiful, from Geryon’s own experience. We see his red boy’s life and his little dog. A scene of wild appeal

from his mother, which breaks off. Interspersed shots of Herakles approaching over the sea. A flash of the gods in heaven pointing to Geryon's doom. The battle itself. The moment when everything goes suddenly slow and Herakles' arrow divides Geryon's skull. We see Herakles kill the little dog with His famous club. (*Autobiography* 6)

Observe the language demarcating scenes, fade outs, zooms, crane shots, and slow motion. Carson sees in Stesichoros's fragments, just as she also sees in Dante's scene of flight, a juxtaposition of different points of view in quick succession. She further develops this inheritance of (proto-)cinematic strategies with the disjunctions and collisions (Sergei Eisenstein would say "conflicts") that generate the motion of *Autobiography*. Zooming in on emotionally laden moments, as well as slowing down the motion and jumping between scenes, Carson's montage techniques celebrate all forms of juxtaposition. She sets up conflicts between genres such as between the narrative and the appendices; between events and their duration (Eisenstein 39), such as when Geryon contemplates the ascent of the rapist up the stairs as slow as lava (Carson 48); between matter and viewpoint (Eisenstein 54), such as when Geryon's contemplation of philosophic problems leads him to write, "I will never know how you see red and you will never know how I see it" (Carson 105); and between the frame of the shot and the subject (Eisenstein 40), such as when Geryon takes "a number / of careful photographs but these showed only the shoes and socks of each person" (72). Carson's insight is to construct a genealogy of the origins of a way of thinking in two separate time frames at once, modern and ancient. Cinematic montage sets two images side by side so that the things become different from themselves and yet remain recognizable. So too does metaphor. Through Dante, then, Carson's monster Geryon puts before our eyes the history of the apparatus (that is, the mental machinery) of a visual language upon which both literary and cinematic practices rely.

Dante, however, is not the only poet to write about Geryon, the monster with wings. Carson is explicit about the more ancient sources she and Dante draw upon. In traditional Greek mythology, Geryon, "most powerful of all men mortal," is a minor character who figures in Herakles' tenth labour. As traditionally narrated in such texts as Apollodorus's *The Library* (2.10), Hesiod's *Theogony* (979–83), and Pausanias's *Description of Greece* (1.35.7 and 4.36.3), the story is full of slaughter and bloodshed, "framed as a thrilling account of the victory of culture over monstrosity" (Carson 6). As an alternative to this rather excessive story of masculine power, Carson resurrects the version told in the fragments of Stesichoros's lyric *Geryoneis*.

According to Carson, Stesichoros's revision of the myth reverses the roles of protagonist and antagonist and thus shifts the point of view. Because we see things through his eyes, the monster becomes the character with whom we sympathize, and so the hero's qualities of masculine courage and zeal begin to appear monstrous. Instead of controlling and containing the monstrous sign, Stesichoros sets it loose.

4. Fragments

Fragmentation and recombination are the key principles in the composition and arrangement of Carson's monstrous text. The composition of the sections of *Autobiography* as a whole, their stark juxtapositions and seemingly random ordering, mimics the material decomposition of the principal interior text, Stesichoros's *papyrus*, over time. Carson explains:

the fragments of the *Geryoneis* itself read as if Stesichoros had composed a substantial narrative poem then ripped it to pieces and buried the pieces in a box with some song lyrics and lecture notes and scraps of meat. The fragment numbers tell you roughly how the pieces fell out of the box. You can of course keep shaking the box. (6-7)

The textual fragments in Stesichoros's (and Carson's) box are ripped and torn, and, as if Carson wishes to underline that these are proper to monsters, they are shaken around with "meat." The image is striking. Just what is going on with all this red meat? If red is a "matter of the body," red meat is even more so (Derrida, *Secret* 100). Red meat is the very stuff we are made of, where we feel our pleasures and our pains. It is what feeds us, and what we are turned into when we die. This complex ambiguity is what Carson, in her commitment to a material, embodied deictic practice which has the potential to topple Cartesian abstraction, wishes to address when she invites us to manipulate the box and pull out and examine the fragments: "'Believe me for meat and for myself,' as Gertrude Stein says. Here. Shake" (7).

5. "What Difference Did Stesichoros Make?"

The association of monsters with language is, according to David Williams, "a profound, longstanding one that simultaneously reveals something of our historical conception of monstrosity as well as an ambivalence toward language itself" (61). His argument that the language of the monstrous is parasitic, feeding at the margins and limits of conventional languages "so as to gain the power to transcend these analytic discourses," helps explain the work of Carson's monster. Williams explains that "true to its etymology

(monstrare: to show),” monstrous language “points to utterances that lie beyond logic” (10). The title of Carson’s first chapter—“Red Meat: What Difference Did Stesichoros Make?”—poses a question that follows from a statement in which neither the logical nor the syntactic relationship between these two parts is visible. Carson thus directs us to a place just beyond our range of experiences, perceptions, and modalities of understanding, where the juxtaposition of discrepant things lets us see and feel what was not before our eyes or what we could not already see.

What difference did Stesichoros make? Carson singles out two major “differences” that Stesichoros has made to literary history. Stesichoros’s first contribution is tropic. According to Carson, Stesichoros unleashed the adjective from the fixity of the Homeric epithet, and thus “released being” (5). Homeric epithets tend to be straightforward: “In the epic world, being is stable and particularity is set fast in tradition. When Homer mentions blood, blood is *black*. [. . .] Death is *bad*. Cowards’ livers are *white*” (4). Then Stesichoros came along, and “suddenly there was nothing to interfere with horses being *hollow hooved*. Or a river being *root silver*. Or a child *bruiseless*. [. . .] Or killings *cream black*” (5). Where in epic, adjectives are used to put things in their place and keep them there, in the lyric world that Stesichoros unleashes, adjectives are used to bring to things spectacular depths and dazzling ambiguities. To move from the “black” of “blood” to the “cream black” of “killings,” for instance, is to leave behind the metonymic—a logic where connections are based on association—and to enter a realm of metaphor—a logic in which connections are limited only by the imagination. This new metaphoric logic is dynamic; in it, dramatic reversals and returns are possible. It also invites a complex and carnal sensory engagement, and this is how it connects with the first part of the proposition “red meat.”

Stesichoros’s adjectives are synaesthetic. His poetic language joins together two images in terms that belong to one or more differing perceptual modes or senses. The connotations and meanings of the images change, depending on which senses the reader considers. The seemingly simple image of killings as “cream black,” for instance, juxtaposes the tactile with the visual—the texture with the colour of blood—just as it invokes the sense of taste, contrasting an image of richness and sustenance with an image of rot and putrescence. One “difference” Stesichoros makes is thus to find a way of using language that invites us to perceive with all of our bodily senses—to make us feel. Another “difference” has to do with how his use of language relates to the way we think. Just as the image formed by Stesichoros’s adjectives

invokes specific sensory experiences, so too does it let us picture the processes of cognition and perception themselves. The rhetorical trope used here, the oxymoron, puts together two contradictory qualities that risk cancelling each other out. “Cream black” qualifies the noun “killing” through this type of cancellation, in effect performing a sort of “killing” on the level of language itself. Carson’s writings frequently return to what she calls “iconic grammar” (*Economy* 52), that is, to statements that do what they say. Such use of language as a “synthetic and tensional” unit that “reenacts the reality of which it speaks,” she says, requires “a different kind of attention than we normally pay to verbal surfaces” (52). The difference Stesichoros makes, then, is to expand the communicability of language. He lets us see that words say but that they also show, that they make us think, but they also make us feel.

According to Carson, Stesichoros’s second contribution to literary history is narrative. Just as he unleashed words from the weight of the past, so too did he unleash story, completely altering the assessment of important mythological figures. In addition to the poet’s revision of the “Geryon Matter” in the *Geryoneis*, Stesichoros turned his attentions to the origins of the Trojan War. After writing a poem about Helen of Troy that replicated the tradition of whoredom “already old by the time Homer used it,” Stesichoros went blind (Carson, *Autobiography* 5). According to the *Testimonia* of Plato, Isokrates, and Suidas, his blindness occurred because Helen herself was furious at the slander. To regain his sight, Stesichoros wrote his famed palinode, or “counter-song,” which recanted the poem he had just written: “No it is not the true story. / No you never went on the benched ships. / No you never came to the towers of Troy” (Carson, *Autobiography* 17). There is a perfect symmetry to the story; the palinode lets the heroine off, and she, in turn, lets the poet off. The story can thus be read as an allegory, with obvious appeal to a writer like Carson, about the power words have to transform the real.

If Stesichoros’s contribution to literary history is to “undo the latches” (5) on the level of syntax, unleashing the adjective from its fixity in epic diction and, on the level of narrative, abandoning the oppressive sets of traditional assumptions about characters such as Helen of Troy and Herakles and Geryon, exactly what “difference” does Anne Carson’s writing make? Like Stesichoros, Carson works to “release being,” but against the directional image she uses to explain Stesichoros’s work, in which all the substances in the world go “floating up” (5), Carson posits a bi-directional image to

explain her own work—bouncing (3). “Words bounce,” Carson explains, and (echoing Gertrude Stein) she elaborates: “Words, if you let them, will do what they want to do and what they have to do” (3). This is a playful metaphor, but it involves a very serious kind of engagement. Words bounce when they connect with other words and with the people who use them. When a speaker picks up a word, she alters its velocity and trajectory forever. When a speaker catches a word, he holds history itself in his hands for an instant, and when he redirects that word, he lets go a different future. A dual movement in which time is dismembered and remembered thus infuses all of Carson’s work. On one hand, Carson shows us ways to break free from the constraints of the past; on the other hand, she asks us to connect with it. Her image of words bouncing and connecting offers a brilliant corollary to her proposition of monstrous fragmentation and rupture. Resuscitative and vital, this image linking past and present recalls Carson’s discussion elsewhere of two ancient practices: the *symbolon*, the concrete token of a gift, which “carries the history of the giver into the life of the receiver and continues it there” (*Economy* 18), and the monument, which has the purpose of “insert[ing] a dead and vanished past into a living present” (73). Re-presentation is thus posited as the point of connection that reunites the subject with the other, the object world, and history.

6. Picturing Escape

Despite the prevalence of narrative traditions which seek to suppress monstrous otherness, monsters can “evoke potent escapist fantasies; the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint” (Jeffrey Cohen 17). Carson’s *Autobiography* celebrates all forms of egress and escape. In the five prefatory parts of the text and the concluding interview, Carson allies her work with that of writers who have shown how to break free from the ideological restraints of traditions, and who have revealed how linguistic and syntactical experiments can widen the possibilities for thought and expression. In the main body of the narrative, her own transformations of the Geryon matter further frame activities of revision in terms of freedom. The central difference between Carson’s and other versions of Geryon’s story has to do with the ending. The slaughter and bloodshed are gone, and in its place is the agony of passion and longing drawn out over time. Traditionally a figure intimately associated with death and the dead, Carson’s Geryon lives well past forty (36, 60).

A comparison can better show the nature and the extent of Carson's revisions. We can begin *hors texte* with one of Stesichoros's fragments, translated by David Campbell, telling of how Herakles slaughters Geryon:

in silence he thrust it cunningly into his brow, and it cut through the flesh and bones by divine dispensation; and the arrow held straight on the crown of his head, and it stained with gushing blood his breastplate and gory limbs; and Geryon drooped his neck to one side, like a poppy which spoiling its tender beauty suddenly sheds its petals. (77)

When Carson translates this fragment in the prefatory part of *Autobiography of Red*, she reveals a greater sensitivity to the poetic quality of the adjectives. Though more dense than Campbell's translation, these images remain tragic:

XIV. Herakles' Arrow

Arrow means kill It parted Geryon's skull like a comb Made
The boy neck lean At an odd slow angle sideways as when a
Poppy shames itself in a whip of Nude breeze. (13)

What in Campbell's translation suggests passivity—"drooping" his neck, "shedding" its petals—becomes, in Carson's translation, active and erotically charged—"sham[ing]" itself in a "whip of Nude breeze." Carson prepares us here to envision Geryon's strength rather than his weakness.

In the actual "Romance" section of *Autobiography of Red*, Carson presents the most radical changes to the fragment. The core metaphors and imagery remain, but the context has shifted. Red, the dominant colour, is now explicitly linked with *eros* (and I think the implicit punning on arrows is intentional) rather than *thanatos*, sex rather than slaughter:

The smell of the leather jacket near
his face [. . .]
sent a wave of longing as strong as a colour through Geryon.
It exploded at the bottom of his belly.
Then the blanket shifted. He felt Herakles' hand move on his thigh and Geryon's
head went back like a poppy in a breeze (118–9)

Having separated the mythic cause ("arrow") from its effect (the boy "neck lean"), Carson overlays a more carnal logic in which the phallus (which presumably is like an arrow) provokes sexual ecstasy (Geryon's head, back "like a poppy in a breeze").

Carson also transforms the weapon, which in the traditional versions of his story cuts Geryon's life short, into a metaphor for time and continuity.

Geryon's favourite question, one to which he returns again and again, concerns the substance of time: what is time made of? Different answers present themselves: "Time isn't made of anything. It is an abstraction / Just a meaning that we / impose upon motion" (90); "Much truer / is the time that strays into photographs and stops" (93). In a discussion about this topic of time, so obviously relevant to a character marked from birth by a powerful fate, we find the arrow, transmuted into a harpoon:

Fear of time came at him. [. . .]
he felt its indifference roar over
his brain box. An idea glazed along the edge of the box and whipped back
down into the canal behind the wings
and it was gone. A man moves through time. It means nothing except that,
like a harpoon, once thrown he will arrive. (81)

The simile retains a classical, quasi-tragic fatalism; a man moves inevitably towards his future just as a harpoon moves to its target. Notice, however, that in this version, there is no mention of what precisely his fate is. The transposition is subtle, but highly relevant. Instead of being represented as the victim of an arrow, Geryon is now figured as that arrow, moving through time towards a future that, though frightening, remains open.

Rather than wrap the story up and impose an ending of any sort, the narrative leaves us *in medias res*, with Geryon and his antagonists, Herakles and Ancash, pausing to ponder the beauty of fire. Time itself might be rushing, but the protagonist, reconciled with his enemies, is now immune to it: "We are amazing beings / Geryon is thinking. We are neighbors of fire. / And now time is rushing towards them / where they stand side by side with arms touching, immortality on their faces, / night at their back" (146). With this inconclusive conclusion, Carson has linked Geryon back to his beginnings as the "mighty son of immortal Khrysaor and Kallirhoe" (Campbell 67). And this is what Carson's bewildering syllogistic exercise in "Appendix C" prophesies for all who dare to step into the labyrinth with monsters, re-visioning storytelling and lies: "we are now in reverse and by continuing to reason this way are likely to arrive back at the beginning" (19). The way Carson leads us to this picture of immortality is noteworthy. Rather than seeking to transcend time or erase the traces of its passing, Carson's archaeological method, by excavating layer upon layer of past meanings, explicitly foregrounds the temporal. She encourages us to disinter the genesis and metamorphosis of each monstrous image she puts before our eyes, and in so doing, invites us to renew its life.

7. Geryon's Photography

Carson's portrait of the monster Geryon casts him as a photographer who specializes in portraits. The medium of photography provides an answer to his perennial question regarding the nature of time: "Much truer / is the time that strays into photographs and stops" (93). Geryon's musings on time and photography begin when he sees a photograph of a volcanic eruption taken by Herakles' grandmother, entitled "Red Patience," which "has compressed / on its motionless surface / fifteen different moments of time, nine hundred seconds of bombs moving up / and ash moving down / and pines in the kill process" (51), and when he hears the story of Lava Man, the only survivor of the volcano, who was a prisoner in the local jail. As a creature of reversals destined to go back to the beginning and revise his own ending, it is only natural that Geryon is compelled by the paradox of the form (it introduces motion into stasis and yet compresses the movement of time into an instant) as well as by the themes of this picture and the story that frames it: "identity memory eternity" (149).

Geryon's insights into the medium develop from these conceptual origins. He realizes that "Photography is disturbing [. . .] / Photography is a way of playing with perceptual relationships" and brings this realization into his practice (65). Many of Geryon's autobiographical photographs are technically impossible; framed by evocative titles and descriptions, they appear to picture things that cannot be seen with the eyes. Often, they are synaesthetic, linking what are usually discrete sensory phenomena: "this page has a photograph of some red rabbit giggle tied with a white ribbon. / He has titled it 'Jealous of My Little Sensations'" (62). Occasionally, their object is unreal, belonging somewhere between dreamspace and prehistory: "He had dreamed of [. . .] creatures that looked like young dinosaurs [. . .] [that] went crashing / through underbush and tore / their hides which fell behind them in long red strips. He would call / the photograph 'Human Valentines'" (131). In both of these instances, Geryon's photographs manage to capture and make permanent the fleeting and transient, repeating "what could never be repeated existentially" (Barthes 4).

Additionally, Geryon's photographs involve complex intertextual negotiations of abstractions. In seventh grade, we are told, Geryon "began to wonder about the noise that colors make":

Roses came
roaring across the garden at him.
He lay on his bed at night listening to the silver light of stars crashing against

the window screen. Most
of those he interviewed for the science project had to admit they did not hear
the cries of the roses
being burned alive in the noonday sun. Like horses, Geryon would say helpfully,
like horses in war. No, they shook their heads. [. . .]
The last page of his project
was a photograph of his mother's rosebush under the kitchen window.
Four of the roses were on fire.
They stood up straight and pure on the stalk, gripping the dark like prophets
and howling colossal intimacies
From the back of their fused throats. (84)

Geryon's acute perceptions of the noises of colour belong to a commonplace of the *Künstlerroman*, highlighting the qualities that will make the protagonist into a real artist. His attention to this particular form of synaesthesia, moreover, allies Geryon closely with artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and perhaps foreshadows Geryon's gradual turning from the representational to the abstract. (Kandinsky claimed he heard sound whenever he saw colours, and suggested that abstraction most effectively reveals the "inner sounds" of a picture [273].)

The most rhapsodic part of the "photograph" lies in the development of its legend. The density of the different moments compressed in the explanatory frame in which Geryon attempts to translate the meaning of his image through an analogy—"like horses in war" (84)—is characteristic of Carson's vast intertextual reaching. Carson's Geryon returns to his origins when he draws this image of horses in war from the very papyrus fragments Carson draws from to tell his story. Horses appear twice in Stesichorus's *Geryoneis*, and in both instances they are linked to chilling images of suffering. In fragment S22, horses are connected to sounds and the limits of the speakable: "(things speakable) and things unspeakable [. . .] untiring and un- [. . .] painful strife [. . .] battles and slaughterings of men [. . .] piercing (cries?); [. . .] of horses [. . .]" (Campbell 81). Fragment S50 sets horses within an image of tearing—" [. . .] (all?) [. . .] horse(s) [. . .] was torn," while the next very brief fragment, S53, seems to announce the location of the scene of tearing: "war" (85).

Geryon's explanation of the photo connects to other histories as well. Within the frame of modern art, the phrase "horses in war" conjures Pablo Picasso's painting of the agony of the Spanish Civil War, *Guernica* (1937), just as the dramatic movements of silver crashing against the screen evoke the swirling motions in Van Gogh's *Starry Night* (1889). Likewise, within the frame of contemporary theory, Geryon's impossible photograph with its

explanatory legend conjures the origins of structuralist linguistics. Geryon offers a verbal explanation in the form of a Saussurean punning for those who are not able to “hear” the noises compressed in these paintings. In the *Cours de linguistique générale*, Ferdinand de Saussure refers to the horse to demonstrate that language is arbitrary, that nothing but a social agreement links concepts (represented in the body of his text as pictures) to sound patterns. An understanding of Saussurean linguistics sheds light on the primary logical connection that leads Geryon from “roses” to “horses,” namely a transposition of sounds rather than any translation of concepts. Geryon’s connections between two seemingly visual images, the rose and the horse, demonstrate the invisible workings of language.

In Geryon’s enigmatic photograph, the roses are on fire; distances shift as Carson brings additional images together to reveal their kinship. The contours of Moses’ burning bush from the book of Exodus—a sign of God made visible—are apparent in Geryon’s rose bush, especially since the flowers themselves grip the “dark like prophets.” Geryon’s photo also recalls the image of “fire and roses” in “Little Gidding,” the fourth of T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* (223). In this poem about revisiting a “familiar compound ghost” (217), Eliot’s burning roses are ambiguous emblems of time’s passing and are used to conjure both endings—“Dust [from the ashes of a burnt rose] in the air suspended / Marks the place where a story ended” (216)—and beginnings—“All manner of things shall be well / when [. . .] / the fire and the rose are one” (223). For both Eliot and the book of Exodus, burning is linked to continuity rather than destruction; Moses’ bush is miraculously untouched by the fire, while in Eliot’s poem, the fire prompts renewal. Thus connoting endurance and eternity, the burning roses offer a fitting corrective to the devastation connoted by the image of horses in war. It should be apparent that the complex metaphorical framing provided by Geryon’s “helpful” explanations is essential to the meaning of the untitled piece. Whether or not their sources are located intertextually in words or pictures, what is at stake in the analogies Geryon lays out as part of the frame is a perspective on those constant themes “identity memory eternity” (149).

Situated just past the limits of the visible, Geryon’s photographs refuse to show merely what has been seen. Instead, they “show seeing” itself (Mitchell). This seeing, however, is planted firmly on the side of *logos*, and is firmly committed to the revisionary. Through Geryon, Carson shows seeing inflected through an implicit critique of violence. Presenting reversals—like photo negatives—of the usual tropes of violence, the portraits of

Autobiography revise the way we look at heroism and victimhood. This seeing is also inflected through a critique of disembodied vision. The portraits' synaesthetic qualities and the ways their meaning emerges from a mediation of word and image guarantee that their meaning climbs up inside and vibrates through the whole body. Finally, this seeing is inflected through a commitment to a dialectic of flux and duration. Carson believes that the image produced by a single phrase can compress an infinity of moments of time on its surface, and that an archaeological excavation of the past can animate what has been buried and even bring new things to life.

8. Reaching to Know

Through the deft strategies of revision and reversal made possible by Geryon's impossible photographic portraits, Carson's *Autobiography* brings us to "one of those moments / that is the opposite of blindness" in which nothing less than "the world" passes back and forth between our eyes (*Autobiography* 39). Clearly, in this image of an epiphany shared by two observers, she wishes to conjure more than mere physical sight, which extends "only to the surface of bodies" (*Economy* 50). Carson's interests are in the red meat, in what lies unseen underneath surfaces and appearances.

In her other more properly scholarly writings, Carson has explicitly developed a theory that remains only implicit in *Autobiography* about the hazards of understanding seeing as something we do only with our eyes. In *Economy of the Unlost*, she recalls Simonides' famous fragment in which he says "the word is a picture of things" (*Economy* 47). Against a reading of the phrase as a commitment to put words to the service of the visible world, Carson argues that Simonides means to conjure words' power to "point beyond themselves toward something no eye can see and no painter can paint" (51). From her analysis of Simonides' fragment, Carson makes it possible to arrive at an understanding that reality is twofold (19): visible and invisible worlds rest side by side (45). "The way to know" this dual reality, she echoes elsewhere in a poem, "is not by staring hard" (*Men* 11). The invisible world, simply put, is not accessible to the eyes or to the arts that restrict their gaze to the surface of things. Instead, using an image that brings together body and mind, she stipulates that to know, one must "reach— / mind empty / towards that thing you should know // until you get it" (11).

Reaching is what Carson does when she dips into the materials of a dead and vanished past and inserts it into the living present (*Economy* 73) and what she does when she mates disparate things in the body of her text. It is

what Carson asks her readers to do as they try to locate the connective tissues that bridge the spaces between the different segments she has positioned side by side. More important, as she demonstrates in the poetic legends to the portraits in Geryon's autobiography, reaching is all around us: it is the work of metaphoric language. Buried here beneath Carson's invitation to reach is a reference to Aristotle, who, in *On Metaphor*, writes that "All men by their nature reach out to know" (*Eros* 70). How can metaphor activate the kind of knowing that is conveyed in this image of reaching? Why is such reaching necessary in the first place?

In *Eros the Bittersweet*, Carson takes us to a moment in cultural history when our perceptual abilities were re-oriented away from the audio-tactile and towards the visual—the moment of alphabetization:

As the audio-tactile world of the oral culture is transformed into a world of words on paper where vision is the principal conveyor of information, a reorientation of perceptual abilities begins to take place within the individual. (43)

One consequence of the new demands placed on vision, Carson suggests, is a global desensorialization of word and reader, and the introduction of distancing in the communication act:

Literacy desensorializes words and reader. A reader must disconnect himself from the influx of sense impressions transmitted by nose, ear, tongue and skin if he is to concentrate upon his reading. A written text separates words from one another, separates words from the environment, separates words from the reader (or writer) and separates the reader (or writer) from his environment. Separation is painful. (50)

Metaphor and other virtuoso "tactics of imagination" (69) which "shift distances" from far to near (73) work against this separation.

Metaphor connects words to each other, to their environment, and to the reader or writer. Metaphor also connects reader and writer to each other. (Ted Cohen explores this notion when he argues that metaphor cultivates intimacy and community [6].) Metaphoric thinking is cognitive and imaginative, but it also is sensory and conveys powerful feeling (Ricoeur 154). It is dynamic, introducing motion into stasis and duration into flux, just as it fragments experiences and then reconnects them in new ways. And even more important, metaphor is liberating. As David Williams puts it, metaphor "jars the mind by disordering our expectations. . . . At the same time, we enjoy it . . . because while it disturbs, metaphor also frees the mind from its habitual course" (41). As a monstrous (that is hybrid, disorderly, and powerful) practice, metaphor demonstrates "what is proper to man" (Derrida, "White" 246).

Long ago, Carson argues in *Autobiography*, a poet named Stesichoros broke free from a restrictive cultural logic where connections were based on contiguity and association and entered into the realm of metaphor, where connections were limitless. In so doing, he undid “the latches” and “released being” (*Autobiography* 5). This connective gesture, one that Geryon repeats with every metaphor-driven image in his “autobiography,” one that Carson repeats as she re-envisioned this story about the things a monster can demonstrate, is one we can repeat every time we allow words and their deferral, which is “beautiful,” “foiled,” and “endless” (*Eros* 29), to take us to the edge. Outside things are mortal, Carson shows us in *Autobiography of Red*, but the realm of metaphoric language connects us back to time and thus to duration. Outside things can only be known through their surfaces, but the realm of metaphoric language lets us get to their meat and in so doing, can restore our own embodied pleasures. In response to a question about “a sort of concealment drama going on in [his] work” in the “Interview” staged with Stesichoros at the end of *Autobiography*, Stesichoros offers to tackle the question of “blindness” (147). “First,” he insists, “I must tell about seeing” (147). And this is the point Carson’s study of metaphor intends to make: until we understand that telling sets seeing into motion, we will remain blind to the world of things needing to be uncovered. Poetic telling invites us to bridge the gaps between the disparate things we see and lets us reach beyond “outside” things to connect with immortality itself.

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